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ABSTRACT

The lack of research on college students' involvement in the management and decision-making in a department led to an information search on these issues. Specifically, the researcher looked at whether or not it was a good idea to involve students in a department of psychology's decisions. Student involvement requires both student and faculty time. Before committing the time, the benefits need to be considered. To gather preliminary information on student opinions about their involvement, members of Psi Chi at one university surveyed advanced psychology students (N=18) to rate whether they should be involved in decision making and planning in 13 areas. Student opinion suggested that students might be more confident in the contributions made by members of Psi Chi than individual majors. One benefit of involving students may be to heighten their awareness of departmental policy and sensitivity to dilemmas facing departments. Student involvement in departmental decisions may require special attention to confidentiality and other ethical issues. The organizational structure of Psi Chi may simplify the logistics of student involvement. (Contains 20 references.) (JDM)

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ED 449 445

# Use of Student Organizations to Advise Faculty

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Might we ask students to participate in the management of departments? The small literature addressing the efficacy of student involvement in policy making focuses on grade school student participation in decision making. Latham (1998) argues that student inclusion in development of rules of discipline may lead to improved student behavior, more active involvement in other activities and enhanced academic performance. Castle and Rogers (1994) suggest that the process may allow students to develop better decision-making and problem-solving skills.

The dearth of research on college student involvement led me to seek information that might generalize to the issue of involving students and student organizations in departmental decisions. This paper reviews issues that bear on the question of whether student or student group involvement in psychology department decisions is a good idea.

## Why Involve Students?

Student involvement requires both student and faculty time. Before committing the time we should ask whether the benefits to students and departments justify their efforts.

*Can involvement benefit students?* Educators and psychologists are aware of the powerful influence of active learning and much recently has been written about active procedures we might use in our classrooms. An entire focus group at the 1991 St. Mary's conference (McGovern, 1993) discussed and made recommendations about use of active learning, suggesting we incorporate a host of active techniques. Most of their recommendations were for changes in classroom teaching but they also recommended we more actively involve students through research, service learning, and experiences in developing events for psychology organizations like Psi Chi (the national honor society in psychology).

Clearly, the cognitive literature shows that elaboration processes allow for better understanding and retention (e.g., Rogers, Kuiper, & Kirker, 1977). Evidence suggests students benefit from more traditional non-classroom active learning experiences such as participation as a classroom teaching assistant (Fremouw, Millard & Donahoe, 1979), collaboration as a laboratory researcher (Spillich, 1997), and involvement in service learning (Chapdelaine, & Chapman, 1999).

The value of other, non-classroom active learning experiences may not be supported by research evidence but it is likely they too serve students well. Student involvement in departmental decisions would likely develop our students' social, organizational, and decision making skills.

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*Can students contribute to the department?* Student contribution to the psychology department is not a foreign concept. We regularly recruit students as teaching assistants, lab assistants, tutors and research assistants. Evidence suggests undergraduate involvement in teaching-related activities serves the department well. For example, faculty report effective use of students as managers of an introductory psychology lab (Kohn, & Brill, 1981), small group discussion leaders (Mendenhall, & Burr, 1983), "clients" for graduate counseling students (Anderson, Gundersen, Banken, Halvorson, & Schmutte, 1989), equipment designers (Wagor, 1990), and project developers (Wesp, 1992).

Several of these researchers argue that more elaborate teaching techniques could not have been developed without the work of their students. Further, it may be that undergraduates are more attuned to the needs of other undergraduates and may serve them better (see, e.g., Fremouw, et al., 1979).

Non-classroom activities may produce other benefits. The reputation of the department may be enhanced when students provide services to the local community (Hardy, & Schaen, 2000), faculty may develop as a result of cooperative research projects with students (Dunn, & Toedter, 1991), and intellectual curiosity may be aroused when students work with faculty to develop a departmental history (Benjamin, 1990). It appears then that students can support the operation of the department in many ways.

## Is Student Opinion Useful and Accurate?

While students and the department can benefit, should we question the abilities of students? Several studies offer evidence regarding the quality of student input.

*Student grading.* Some evidence suggests students accurately assess the quality of the work of their peers (Smith, 1990). Student ratings of peer performance in classroom debates showed student opinion correlated well with the instructors evaluation of performance. Poor correlation between faculty and student ratings were apparent on questions related to the quality of empirical evidence. Peer raters lacking broad training in an academic disciple would have a difficult time evaluating whether the evidence was covered comprehensively.

*Focus groups.* Keller (1994) supports use of focus groups to gather departmental information not available through other assessment forms. He suggests focus groups are effective tools to discover student perception of departmental policies and performance related to issues such as advising, support material, support facilities, student involvement in departmental activities, or curricular issues.

*Feedback regarding pedagogical aids and textbooks.* Student opinion about course material may help identify what strategies students use to learn (Weiten, Guadagno, & Beck, 1996). The authors suggest that students who identify study aids such as chapter outlines as less than useful may be misguided in their study strategies. Procidano (1991)

asked students to evaluate the importance of two writing assignments. She found a positive correlation between GPA and ratings and suggested student ability may relate to student recognition of the importance of writing activities. Again we see that the quality of decisions may be a function of experience, knowledge, or skills students may lack.

Jacobs (1983) reports that student evaluation of textbooks were similar to his own and found student feedback useful enough to begin asking students their opinion about other aspects of the course such as use of supplemental readings, class schedules, and class projects. Stang (1975) found consistency from course to course in student ratings of textbooks but found that overall ratings were based primarily on interest level. Since most books undergo significant editorial scrutiny before being published, it is difficult to asses whether students could reject books that were factually inaccurate.

*Student Evaluations.* I will not address the debate over the validity of student ratings of teaching. Some have argued they serve as useful feedback to improve teaching. For example, mid-term evaluations of teaching may provide helpful feedback to allow instructors to refine courses in mid-stream (Keutzer, 1993). However, the usefulness of student feedback that is provided without interpretation may be limited (Cohen, & Herr, 1982). Again, the "Dr. Fox" effect suggests students may not be best at evaluating the accuracy of material communicated by faculty (Naftulin, Ware, & Donnelly, 1973).

## In What Issues Should Students Have a Say?

The literature I reviewed suggests that both the student and department can benefit from student involvement. Further, student opinion is useful and accurate when students are addressing issues in which they have some background, knowledge, or experience. The next question I asked was about how students feel about their involvement in departmental decisions.

*Student opinion about student involvement.* To gather some preliminary information about student opinion about their involvement, two officers of East Stroudsburg University's chapter of Psi Chi, Amanda Terembula, and Jamie Bonk, and I identified 13 activities in which students might become involved. We asked 18 advanced psychology students to rate whether they should be involved in decision making and planning in each area. Students rated separately the appropriateness of involving individual psychology majors and Psi Chi members as a group. Ratings were made on a scale from -5 (definitely should not be involved) to +5 (definitely should be involved).

We averaged all student ratings for each question. We saw this as a small pilot study and did not subject the data to statistical tests. With this small sample, one should view small differences in rank with caution. The first table shows the rankings for general student involvement and the second table for Psi Chi involvement.

SUPPORT FOR GENERAL STUDENT INVOLVEMENT
(rank from least to most support)

1. Grade requirements for the major (e.g., require a 2.0 QPA in major)
2. Budget issues
3. Course requirements for the major (e.g., must take Intro. Psychology)
4. General grading policies
5. Allowed to attend department meetings
6. Textbook decisions
7. Evaluation of those applying to teach Psychology courses
8. Required activities in classes (papers, projects, research studies, etc.)
9. Teaching techniques (lecture vs. discussion vs. other methods)
10. Develop information about the Department (Websites, brochures, etc.)
11. Development of new courses
12. Course offerings any term (e.g., offer Testing, Counseling, etc.)
13. Evaluation of faculty

SUPPORT FOR PSI CHI INVOLVEMENT
(rank from least to most support)

1. Grade requirements for the major (e.g., require a 2.0 QPA in major)
2. Textbook decisions
3. Course requirements for the major (e.g., must take Intro. Psychology)
4. General grading policies
5. Evaluation of those applying to teach Psychology courses
6. Budget issues
7. Required activities in classes (papers, projects, research studies, etc.)
8. Teaching techniques (lecture vs. discussion vs. other methods)
9. Course offerings any term (e.g., offer Testing, Counseling, etc)
10. Evaluation of faculty
11. Allowed to attend department meetings
12. Development of new courses
13. Develop information about the Department (Websites, brochures, etc.)

*Conclusions and observations.* We were not surprised at the lack of support for any type of involvement in establishing grade requirements for the major, grading policies, textbook selection, or course requirements. Students see that as the faculty member's job.

Further, we were not surprised at the support for student involvement in development of information about the department. Our students at East Stroudsburg have been involved in those activities and Psi Chi has been very involved. Psi Chi members have gathered information about the department for our web site and handbook, spoken to high school students and potential transfer students at college fairs, helped in orientation of new majors, and conducted a survey of local professionals about their interest in our

developing a masters program. Student work in this area has been very useful and helpful and students seem to appreciate being give these responsibilities. Our student reaction may differ from the reaction of students at schools where these activities are not the norm.

Similarly, we were not surprised to see support for student involvement in evaluation of faculty because they regularly evaluate all departmental courses and are involved in focus group discussions where they offer us feedback. However, I was surprised at low ratings for evaluation of new faculty applicants as we encourage students to meet with candidates and students submit evaluations of candidate lectures.

Students supported involvement of both individuals and Psi Chi in determining course offerings. Jamie, Amanda and I met with about half of the students after they completed the survey and discussed their views. Several students expressed concern about the variety of courses we offered and the lack of multiple sections of required course. Student involvement in decisions about course offerings would allow them to see faculty constraints (e.g., scheduling conflicts and funding) that make such scheduling difficult.

Students expressed strong support for Psi Chi involvement in Department meetings but not for involvement of individual students. I believe that students were expressing a concern that they be represented by responsible students. Psi Chi chapters have a structure to allow for dissemination of information and discussion of issues. That structure would allow for a more convenient interface for faculty and students to communicate their concerns.

## General Conclusions

The literature appears to show that students can make significant contributions, but that contributions may be limited by student expertise. Student opinions suggest that students may feel more confident in contributions made by members of Psi Chi than individual majors. Asking student's their opinion may have other advantages. For example, student involvement in decisions may heighten student awareness of departmental policy and sensitivity to dilemmas facing departments. Student involvement in departmental decisions may require special attention to confidentiality and other ethical issues. The organizational structure of Psi Chi may simplify the logistics of student involvement.

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